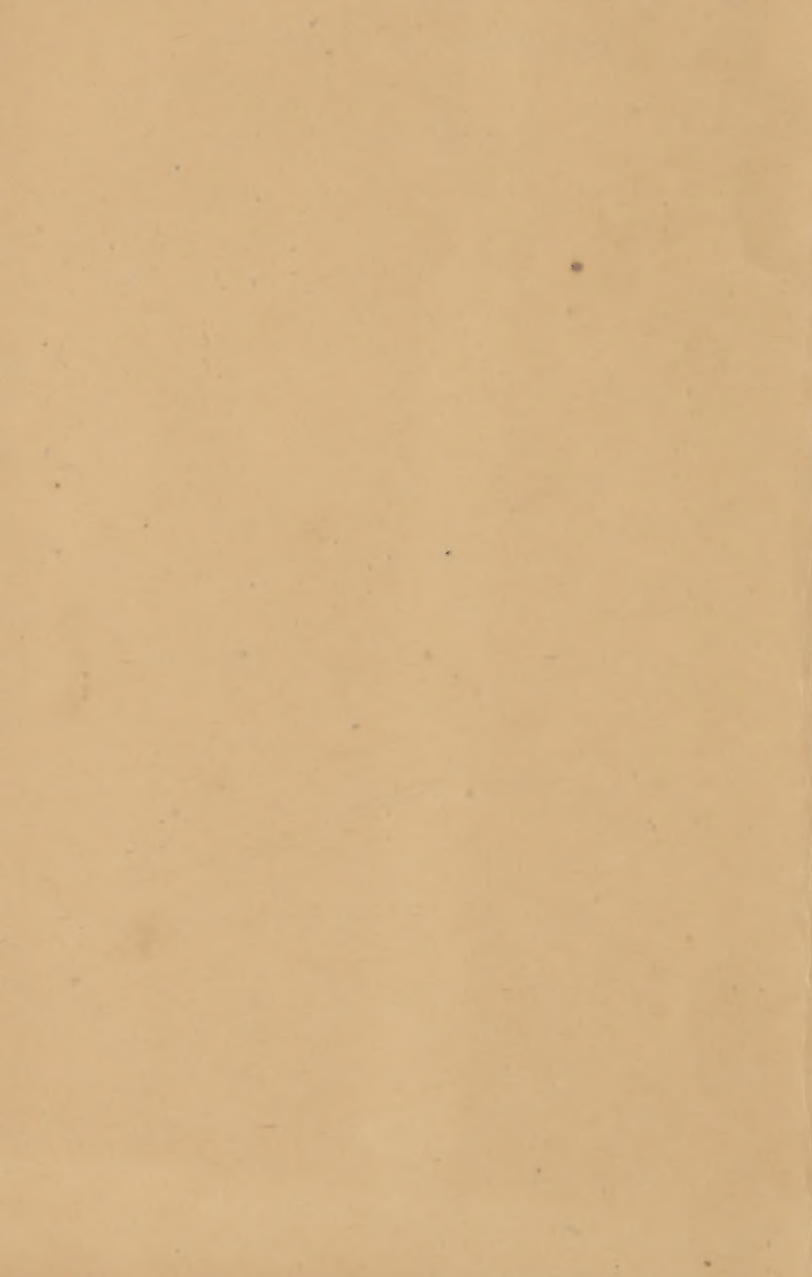


Frothingham. (O.B.)

The ministries of pestilence





The Ministries of Pestilence.

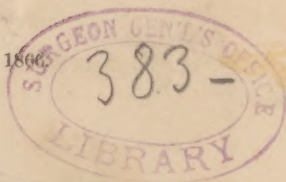
SERMON

BY

REV. O. B. FROTHINGHAM,

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH OF THE REDEMPTION, NEW YORK.

SUNDAY, JULY 1, 1866.



PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

NEW YORK:

JAMES MILLER,

522 BROADWAY.

1866.

THE MINISTERS OF JUSTICE

THE OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

— P E T I T I O N —

REV. A. B. TROTTENHAM

— P E T I T I O N —

— P E T I T I O N —

— P E T I T I O N —

NEW YORK

WILLIAM L. BAKER

ATTORNEY AT LAW

1887

THE MINISTRIES OF PESTILENCE.

Thou shalt not be afraid of the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flyeth by day ; for the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the destruction that walketh at noonday.—PSALMS xci., 5, 6.

WHY should one be afraid even of things like these ? Is it not a little sad that in this century and among our people the mere word Pestilence should cause the panic it does ; should bring pallor to the cheek ; should make people hurry in crowds from the city, leaving it to its doom, if the hour of its doom has come ? Does it not show a want of that solemn yet glad faith of the old Hebrew bard, which told him that if he nestled close to the Most High he should be safe ? What if terror and pestilence do walk in the darkness of night, if we are sleeping on the bosom of Providence ? What if the arrow does fly by day, if we know from what bow the arrow speeds, and what mark it is aimed at ? What if destruction does waste at noonday, if its track is clear in the sunlight, if we see that it wastes only where wasting was necessary, and are able not only to keep from the wasting ourselves, but to rescue others from it too ? The darkness in which the terror of the pestilence walks is our darkness, not God's ; it is the darkness of our ignorance and squalor and vice. The daylight in which the arrow flies and the destruction is abroad, is God's daylight, clear with the knowledge that God gives and the love that God sheds.

Why fear, if the thing we dread is visible to our eye and palpable to our touch ; if we know on what conditions it is strong and under what circumstances it is weak ; if we have

discovered its origin, tracked its course, found out its secret ways, mastered the weapon it uses to kill? Why fear, if we can be certain that, terrible as it is, it has a place among the ministers of Divine Providence, and is an agent in furthering the health and the general well-being of mankind? Physical evils come in the natural course of things, and under conditions which, as they occur, we cannot control. They are a part of the working universe which must be accepted meekly, and will be accepted gratefully by all intelligent men. We shall not call them evils, but goods; not destroyers, but preservers; not wasting pestilences, but saving physicians; not poisons, but balms; not ministers of death, but ministers of life; friendly angels though dark.

I say this, in full faith, even of that most dreaded pestilence, the mere name whereof is terror, that now stares at us from its lurking places, and by an occasional spring reminds us that its subtlety and its power are still formidable. Even to that pale, wan, ghastly, skeleton figure, with stony eyes and breath of the grave, which we call "cholera," I do not hesitate to say, "Thou art not demon—thou art angel." I remember what it has done, and how murderously it has done it. I have before me the history of its ravages, and the appalling figures that tell how some forty millions of human beings have perished from it since it first left its lair by the banks of the Ganges. I see its frightful coils unrolling themselves slowly, and in the course of a century and a half extending themselves till they embraced the fairest portion of the habitable globe, and crushed in their awful folds family after family, tribe after tribe of man. I see it creeping stealthily over Hindostan, basking in the deep, warm valleys, haunting the low coast like Vedder's sea-serpent, lifting its horrid head in the great cities, Jessore, Calcutta, Benares, Bombay, Madras—swimming seas and coming up in the sunniest of their islands, travelling deserts and mountains, and terrifying lands which thought themselves secure by reason of their remoteness

or the rigors of their climate. North, South, East and West the monster goes, hydra-headed, myriad-footed. Its length stretches across the immense empire of China, from Canton to Peking ; Persia is open to it, and Bagdad ; Bassora and Shiraz are full of dead, one-third of their inhabitants turning livid, as it were, in a day ; Ispahan bars her gates against the caravans from Shiraz, and escapes ; Yezd opens hers to the camels, and has to bury seven thousand of her children as a reward for her hospitality. The swift python dashes at Astrachan, at the mouth of the Volga, and after licking up its people with its tongue, glides up the river and touches Moscow with its poisoned fang. From Moscow to St. Petersburg is but a step. From St. Petersburg the pale death menaces Europe. There is mourning in Austria, Prussia and the German States ; the nobility and gentry of Vienna are among its victims. From Hamburg it makes its way to England, Scotland and Ireland. The Atlantic Ocean is no barrier. It is in Quebec, Montreal ; it is in New York, Albany, Philadelphia. The North and West offer fruitful fields for its desolation. The great towns are deserted. It is swifter than the feet of the flyers—the *thought* of it is almost death. It was so quick, so subtle, so sudden, so horrible in aspect, so deadly in touch ; it carried with it so hideous a prestige of success ; it made so light of the elements, had such scorn for the knowledge and skill of men, was so remorseless, that its name was actually synonymous with Fate.

All this I remember, and, bearing it in mind, I still say, “Thou shalt not fear for the terror nor the pestilence,” for the monster has a balsam under his tongue. Everything that does God’s work is God’s minister. The work justifies the ministry. But the work must be carefully scrutinized. Not all understand it. God’s ministers are silent ; they are dumb ; they sound no trumpet before them ; they send on no herald to announce and explain their errand ; they appear, fulfil their mission, and vanish, leaving mortals to find

out for themselves what their mission was. To find out is their education. If they do not find out, and consequently do not heed the lesson, the ministers come again. Again they perform their task, again they disappear leaving men to their speculations. God can better dispense with human lives than with human wisdom. We must learn honestly, though we die for it.

Until our times, the Ministry of Pestilence has been misunderstood; therefore it has again and again returned. Its work was undone, and it renewed it every few years. The old people said to one another: "It is a messenger from God who is angry with us because we have neglected his honor. We have been slack in service to him; we have deserted his temples; we have laid cheap sacrifices upon his altars; we have despised his priests; we have forgotten to pray; the sacred books are unread, the sacred places unvisited, the sacred rites unobserved. These are deadly sins, which God punishes with death. Let us return to our allegiance, and the plague will be stayed. We must drop on our knees; we must fast; we must do penance; we must kill the fatted calf; we must devote the first-born child; we must humiliate ourselves in the dust." This is the interpretation that prevailed until recently all over Asia and Europe. It is the interpretation that is accepted to-day by the priesthoods of the civilized world. Even the priesthood of England have not dropped it.

The pestilence has not respected that interpretation. On the contrary, it has declared its utter scorn of it, by swooping down more fiercely on those who acted on it. A Hindoo woman, impressed with the general belief that the pestilence would cease when a human sacrifice had been offered to placate the gods, requested that she might be burned on the dead body of her husband, insisting that the pestilence would be checked in five days from her death. The request was granted. The flames turned the living woman to ashes; the pestilence silently swept on.

At Tiflis, in Asiatic Georgia, the terrified inhabitants had recourse to religious ceremonies, crowded the temples, marched in long processions. They only drew on them the curse they hoped to avert. The crowding, the heat, the excitement, the fatigue, the hunger, handed them over ready victims to the devastation. With a grim humor, the destroyer fell upon them, and of thirty thousand men and women, in a few weeks but eight thousand remained. Superstition and Plague are sworn allies. The cholera revelled in the Indian Juggernaut, till the car of sacrifice stopped for lack of fanatics to pull it. At Hurdwar, in Northern Hindostan, the pilgrims had gathered in immense numbers—tradition says, a million and a half—to offer sacrifice to their gods. Every house was full; the banks of the sacred river were lined with tents; poor, thin-clad, dirty, tired, the superstitious masses went through their sacred ceremonies. The pale eye of the pestilence fell on them as they kneeled in their pious pauperism and fanatic filth, and in eight days twenty thousand of them had confessed by their livid corpses that pestilence did not turn out of its way for prayers. The ceremonies ended suddenly; the multitudes dispersed in terror; the monster, having no more dirty devotees to devour, forsook the city; when the offal was removed the scavenger took himself away.

If a thing proposes what it accomplishes, we may safely say that pestilence proposes death to superstition and fanaticism—to the piety that drops on its knees instead of using its feet and hands, and to the devotion that puts up prayers instead of putting down ignorance.

We read the meaning of the pestilence differently, and judge quite otherwise of its work. To us it is a minister of piety, but of that piety which holds that men must be pure before they can be peaceable.

Let me enumerate briefly some of the genuine ministrations to us of this dread visitor.

1. In the first place it, obviously enough, comes to teach

us and to impress on us by every conceivable emphasis the primary value of our physical conditions, and the imperative necessity of observing them. It charges us to live decently, cleanly, purely, temperately, chastely, or we shall die. It tells us it is better that thousands should fall at our side, and ten thousand at our right hand, than that the simplest laws of health should not be observed by the living. So absolute is the necessity of wholesome habits that they will be purchased cheaply at any cost. The terror may prevail; the arrow may fly; the pestilence may walk, and the destruction waste; the living may scarcely be sufficient to bury the dead; but the living must be made to feel the necessity of living like rational creatures. It would seem as if men and women ought to be cleanly and sweet for the joy of it. But if they will not be, then the terror of the consequence of being otherwise must be brought to bear on them. Perhaps they will be content to go to heaven, if there is no other way of escaping hell. They will accept a breath of sweet air, if the alternative is a spasm of cholera; rather than turn livid, collapse, and die, they will bathe in fresh water, and wear clean linen. If the only choice is a horrid blackness and corruption, they will possibly remove the garbage from their streets, and blow the poison from their sleeping chambers. What is cleaning our foul sewers of their accumulated filth? Pestilence. What is sweeping our loathsome streets? Pestilence. Cholera impels the sweeping machine. What carries off the heaps of offal that pour disease upon the air? Pestilence. What neutralizes the destroying gases in the atmosphere? Pestilence. What covers the soil with disinfectants? What breaks up the fever nests which avarice built out of human lives, and grows rich on? Pestilence. What expels the grave-yards, and slaughter-houses from the city? Pestilence. What closes dram-shops and forbids the dealing out of liquid death? Pestilence. It is more powerful for virtue and temperance than all the preachers and phy-

sicians in the city. Pestilence says to the drunkard, "Thou shalt abstain," and to the drunkard-maker, "Thou shalt cease thy traffic;" and nothing but pestilence can say that with authority. God takes no such pains to make us pious as he does to make us clean; shows no such desire to make us devout as he does to make us decent; displays no such anxiety that we shall keep the Sabbath, or observe the Sacraments, or read our bibles, or bring our children to be baptized, or circulate tracts among the heathen, or look out for the salvation of our souls, as he displays, that we shall ventilate our dwellings, and wash our bodies, and eat and drink nothing that defiles; no such terrible ministers come to drive us into the creeds and churches, as come to drive us out of our cellars and attics; no such angels are sent to scourge us for our neglect of ordinances as are sent to scourge us for our neglect of the most familiar sanitary laws. What a rebuke to those who affect to think lightly of the physical life! God shows *his* regard for the physical life by such terrible visitations on its neglect as spread dismay over continents, and make charnel houses of cities. God says: My laws are written on your frames, are enunciated in the conditions of your animal existence, are wrought into the structure of your bones and flesh, are organized in your social constitutions. First of all, you must know them there, and respect them there. You cannot know them or respect them elsewhere until you do; and I shall spare no terror or agony till you do know and respect them there. The terror shall prowl by night; the arrow shall fly by day; the pestilence shall walk in darkness; the destruction shall waste at noon-day; but you shall live as rational beings should live; you shall live as men and women; it is better that you should not live at all; it is better that you should die of plague than that you should live like beasts! How God must love his children down to the very dust they are made of, when it comes to this!

2. And yet this, holy and tender and saving as it is, is

but one of the noble ministrations of the pestilence we all have dreaded. Let me speak of another, so exquisitely delicate that I am almost afraid to mention it lest you should think me fanciful, but so deep and true that I could not justify myself in quite passing it by. You have been struck no doubt by the frequent statement that the pestilence, while fearful beyond expression in its aspects, full of pallor, ghastliness and disgust, is actually PAINLESS. The victim dies, without any agonizing anticipation of death, or any definite consciousness of its approach. He does not know when he takes the poison ; he does not believe he has taken it ; he does not believe himself in danger. One of the most common, familiar, and decidedly the most alarming symptom of the pestilence is its painlessness. Even physicians, we are told, who have urged watchfulness on their patients, have been cheated by the adversary, and have fallen in collapse before they suspected that the enemy was upon them. Be most suspicious when you suspect nothing ! Be most alarmed when you have the least cause for alarm ! Start at once when you feel no uneasiness ! A double ministration here ! A ministration of Mercy—how tender and loving ! It is as if God said : You have a needful lesson to learn, and you will learn it only in this way of death ; you will learn it only through your fear and sorrow. The teacher shall be fearful beyond expression in aspect. He shall have about him all that makes death appalling ; he shall look like a demon from the pit ; but his method shall be gentle. Those of you who are doomed to die shall have a swift and easy release. I wish to terrify you, not to hurt you. My minister shall look like a monster. Then he may be less of a monster."

"Thou knowest our frame. Thou rememberest that we are dust."

There is mercy in this painlessness ; but there is a deep irony too. The terrible thing is to be without pain. Think of that ! A little hurting might save you ! A prick, a

sting, an ache, might put you on your guard! See that you do not wait for them! They are not your enemies. Apathy is your enemy! Carelessness is your enemy! "Easy don't care" is your enemy. The sense of security is your enemy! Bland self-confidence is your enemy. What you call assurance of belief, composure of mind, quiescence of heart, is your enemy! Suspect *patience*. Suspect quiescence. It is symptomatic of pestilence! It may be that, when you feel no pain, you are dying; that mental quietude may be the sign of an approaching collapse. That moral comfort may indicate the swift ebbing out of the vital powers: that spiritual certainty of yours may be what is significantly called a "dead" certainty: a searching lesson—worth meditating long. I drop it, however, and pass on to another.

3. The next ministration of pestilence is a ministration to our moral will. It tells us that to a very great degree, to a degree immeasurable as yet, man is master of his Fate. The monster that has coiled its fatal folds again and again round the globe—the fatal, the invincible, the unavoidable—the monster who thus far has seemed to come and go as he pleased, a dark, subtle power of death—whose mystery as much baffled comprehension as its power baffled opposition, stops in our harbor. The physicians in the city lop off one by one his hydra heads as they appear above ground—and sear the stump so that no second head may grow. We may say with some confidence, that the God of Healing has slain the dragon. Is it blasphemous to say so? Is it derogatory to Deity to say that man, by means of the faculties that Deity gave him, the science that Deity enabled him to acquire, the skilful use of remedies that Deity stowed away in the earth and the air, and taught him how to use, man saves himself from the death which once was thought inevitable, and turns away from his door the grim messenger whom piety once received meekly as commissioned from Heaven? Is it any reflection on Provi-

dence to say that man himself is a part of its working power, and one of its most effective parts too—that man, in becoming a providence to himself, illustrates the Divine Providence more nobly and touchingly than by throwing all care for himself on brute elements and laws—that man, in *living* for himself, demonstrates God's care *for* him with infinitely more conclusiveness than he would do by letting himself go—and fast becoming the victim of all the wild beasts that prowl about his dwelling? Who but God has given to man his wit, his will, his invention, his perseverance, his power over the elements of destruction? Is not the use of these qualities the best tribute to Him who bestowed them—and is not the result of their use as clearly “providential” as if it had dropped upon man, as he sat idle folding his hands? Indeed it is, and more so. For in this latter case—perceiving no connection between cause and effect—we might cry “chance,” “fortune,” “luck;” but now we are compelled to say Law, Providence, God!

The pestilence bids us believe—may *assure* us, that even in desperate cases, which seemed decided in advance against us, we hold our destinies in our hands. We are meant to be masters of our life and death. A test case was presented. The pestilence came with full prestige of success; it had the reputation of being the King of Death; its bow-string soundless; its arrow invisible and unerring. It came robed in terror that paralyzed before the dart touched; disabling fear went before it. Mystery made it impalpable as a ghost; an evil spirit of the air, it clung to us in the dark, and would not let us go. It stood for every kind of deadliness; it embodied all physical evils in one shape. It seemed the last enemy that would be overcome—*Death itself*. Medical science had no consistent and fixed philosophy in regard to its origin and nature, and possessed but two or three definite hints touching its cure.

Against this enemy of life stands man, beaten thus far in his wrestling with the demon, weak and faint—with a few

disinfectants in his hand, and in his mind a few very definite notions in respect to the value of a pure atmosphere, a sweet light, wholesome food and drink, cleanliness of person, temperance of habit. With these few smooth stones in his pouch, and a sling to hurl them from in his hand, he steps out to meet the gigantic Philistine, and the Philistine falls. What foe, then, may not go down at last, when man shall believe that he is the best part of Providence, and that God works best when he works with man's rational powers! I am not boasting. I know the Summer is not ended, and that the deadly poison is in the air, and before the "dog days" are past, the pestilence may break out furiously, and for the moment may get the upper hand of science and skill. But the success will be momentary only! Nothing is more certain than that a stab has been dealt at the monster's heart, and that his energy will be but the convulsive spasms of his death.

The pestilence renders us vast service by confirming our faith in the evanescence of evil. Hitherto it has demonstrated the constancy, the persistency, the invincibility of evil. At this point of its history it demonstrates the reverse. Evil appears in our eyes a mighty thing. That is because we do not see what it is. We know nothing about it, and therefore think it immense. We note the mystery there is about it, the subtlety of its approaches, the slowness of the occasions that bring it on, its cunning, invidious working; we omit to notice that it goes as mysteriously as it comes, and that the means that check it are as slight as the means that produce it. Its vital parts are exposed, and a single blow planted there where it is vulnerable causes it to collapse. This pestilence has always been easily outwitted. The disease came down on one thousand artillery men in India as they were encamped on a narrow tongue of land on the coast. In six days seven hundred out of one thousand men died in convulsions. The colonel changed his campground; then it was his enemy who died.

The Marquis of Hastings was encompassed with an army of ninety thousand men on the right bank of the river Betosch. The pestilence fell upon him, carried off nine thousand in twelve days, some of them in a few minutes after the attack; covered the field with the dying and the dead. The Marquis, seeing his fine army wither away like premature grass before the flame, marched his men fifty miles to an elevated plateau. There, the pestilence gazed at him in vain. All mortals die easily when they are struck in the right place.

Those of you who have read Victor Hugo's "Toilers of the Sea" will remember his powerful description of the boat's combat with the jolly fish. His pulp has run into a figure of the weak to clutch a crab which he wanted for food, and suddenly he felt himself seized; something smooth, slippery, hot, close, adhesive, curled round his naked arm. In less than a second it held his wrist in the pressure of a vice; it had twisted about his elbow, lashed his shoulder and fastened a fang under his armpit. The lightning was as supple as leather, hard as steel, cold as night. A second toiler, scowling and pointed, leaped from the crevice like a tongue from a black throat. It struck his naked body, and swiftly encircling itself, clasped him tightly around the trunk, producing an insupportable distress, as if innumerable flies, glued to his flesh, were smothering at his blood. A third tentacle, rough as a cord, lashed his side. A fourth, as stiff as an arrow, held its terrible grip in his belly. There was no cutting or tearing away these vicious bands, each one of which was furnished with points innumerable, each point a centre of stinging and frightful agony. A fifth darted from the rocky mouth and fastened its fangs on his midriff. He could hardly breathe. All the five toilers clung close from the same centre, and belonged to the same creature. They crawled and twisted about Gillott; they applied their mouths to new places on his body.

Suddenly from the fissure sprang an immense glutinous

mass, round, flat, hideous ; and from the centre of it looked two eyes. That was his enemy ; he knew him in a moment. He was man's most formidable foe in the waters. The old hydras were amusing by the side of him. He was the master-piece of the horrible. The creature had no muscular form, no warning cry, no breast-plate, no tusk, no sword, no sting, no clasping, pointed, or benumbing tail, no cutting fins, no talons, no thorny sides, no electric battery, no venom, no claws, no beak, no teeth. Yet of all creatures he was most formidably armed. Hugo devotes a whole chapter to the nature and habits of this foul creature, and to speculations on the uses and significance of such hideous enormities in the universe of God. All this while the hero remains hopelessly clasped in his embrace. He fortunately had his knife in his mouth, and his left hand free. He watched his chance ; he knew that the monster was vulnerable in one spot, and at one instant. He knew that while it would be useless to hack all day long at his tough, elastic arms, a single stroke of the knife, as the beast pushed forward his head, would bring him low. The enemies, man and monster, eye each other. A sixth teutacle aimed at the left arm to clamp it to the man's side, is eluded. At the same instant, the head darts forward at his chest. In a second, all is over. All is over for the beast. The blade comes down ; a swift, circular cut severs the head from the body ; the four hundred mouths cease drinking blood ; the horrid fingers let go their hold ; the terrible enemy is a heap of lifeless jelly at his feet. The monster was but pulp, after all.

All monsters are but pulp. You need not call in Hercules, or Apo'lo, or the Christian saints, or the Virgin mo'her, or the Christ, to exorcise your demons, and destroy Destruction. A single blow, planted scientifically in the vulnerable spot, will turn the biggest and most formidable evil to a heap of jelly. A little quick lime and opium, well-applied, breaks the fatal charm of centuries, and proves to mankind that the master-piece of the horrible is at his

mercy and awaits his judgment. The weapon whose point has death in it for every kind of grotesque malignity, is in his hand ; his left arm at least is free, however the rest of him may be bound. So much of his freedom no monster evil can deprive him of. Let him use it, and he is safe.

All these good ministrations, then, are lent us by the pestilence. It enforces the conditions of physical health, as nothing else does, constraining us to save our lives, and mend our habits. It delivers a powerful lesson against apathy and neglect. It thunders anathema against idleness and vice. It summons all the human energies to the work of social defence and improvement. It calls us from the tomb of a blind, dumb fear, and an equally blind and dumb trust, into the world of natural self-reliance and honest endeavor. It convinces us that we are masters of our destiny ; that the regenerating might is within ourselves, and that what we call evil is but the creation of our ignorance and dread. The last half century has changed one of the great curses of the world into something very like a bug-bear. Another fifty years will change it into a night-mare. In a few generations more, it will be a dark memory, lying like a spent cloud on the western horizon, with a gorgeous sunshine waving above it its golden swords.

Robert J. Johnston, Printer, 33 Beckman street, N. Y.



